THERE ARE NO GIRLS IN MY CLASSROOM: A PEDAGOGICAL NOTE

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In halls, break rooms, and offices of colleges across the United States (and likely the world), one can hear such sentiments as, "These kids today just don't have any work ethic," or "This girl in my class is going to fail if she doesn't get her act together." Ignoring for a moment the disparagement in these comments, I would like to discuss a deeper issue: the diminutizing of college students. After all, those of us who teach college students do not teach children; by and large we only teach adults. In this brief essay, I would like to explore this phenomenon a bit deeper in an effort to help teachers become more careful users of language. Although my remarks are directed mainly to those teachers who deal with adult students, they should also provide food for thought concerning how teachers at any level linguistically construct relationships with their students.

Diminutizing the Student

Using the terms of childhood to describe students is quite ingrained into our collective consciousness. Perhaps part of this comes from the inherent power differential in the relationship between student and teacher that invites a kind of paternal or maternal view of students. However, it is not only the teachers who apply these terms to students but also the students themselves. In my rhetorical theory course, I explain that the words we use display a particular orientation toward the person or the object and guide our perceptions of him, her, or it. As an example, I ask my students to tell me what is

wrong with the following sentence: "There is a girl in my other class who is struggling, but I think she'll make it through." They rarely recognize that the problem is that I have described one of their peers as a *girl.* Yet such a term betrays an orientation to my students, especially those who are female, as paternalistic and lacking in respect. Dan Hahn and Robert Ivie write, "Naming a situation ... discloses our attitude toward it, and that disclosure, in turn, circumscribes our expectations, observations and responses."[1] If I think of my students as children, I am far more likely to treat them as children, to expect less of them, and to dumb down the curriculum to what I perceive is their level.

The atmosphere of the course is an integral part of the learning process.[2] As professors, we must constantly consider what kind of atmosphere we are creating in our classrooms. Do we create an atmosphere of inclusion and respect or one of paternalism and coddling? The way we address students has implications for how we teach those students. I address my students as adults and I treat them as such. I expect that they are able to handle college-level material, and this is evident in my pedagogical practice. For example, rather than using textbooks, where possible I use primary research from journal articles. I have found that students will generally rise to the occasion—some even admit that they take my courses because they want a challenge. Yet at the risk of making a chicken and egg argument, I suggest that my approach all begins at the moment I define my students.

The Power of Language in the Classroom

Kenneth Burke suggests that the words that we use filter our perception, calling this idea "terministic screens": "Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen.... That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observations implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice of terms was deliberate or spontaneous."[3] The words one chooses to describe a situation can have unintended consequences. Benjamin Lee Whorf once investigated industrial fires and explosions and found that the root cause was not simply accidental, but a consequence of their linguistic construction of the environment. He noted that workers who handled drums filled with gasoline would handle them with care, but when handling empty drums, they were "careless, with little repression of smoking or of tossing cigarette stubs about. Yet the 'empty' drums are perhaps the more dangerous, since they contain explosive vapor."[4] Whorf points out that despite their seemingly empty state, the drums were in no way empty—they

only seemed that way. Moreover, by treating them as empty, the workers placed themselves in a dangerous situation. Another linguist, Edward Sapir, likewise suggests that the language that we use places our mind into particular kinds of "grooves," guiding our perceptions of the things around us.[5] As Whorf demonstrates, these perceptions then translate into a particular way of acting.

I do not wish to seem like a linguistic determinist, but it does seem clear that the language one uses to describe a person, object, or relationship influences one's perceptions. Moreover, the words chosen reveal much to others about the perceptions of the person speaking them. Let us consider the following axiom of communication proposed by Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson: "One cannot *not* communicate;" they conclude that "others, in turn, cannot *not* respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating."[6] Regardless of intention, words can never be taken as simply the sum of their propositional content. This is because there are two facets of communication: a content level and a relationship level.[7] Recognition of this makes Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson's axiom all the more powerful. Although students in a college classroom may recognize that the teacher is addressing *them* with the term "boys and girls," the perception of the relationship between student and teacher that is held by the teacher would be unmistakable to the students involved. In other words, teachers cannot simply resort to the excuse, "you know what I mean," as a way to maintain sloppy patterns of speech.

A Modest Proposal

Like some of my readers, I struggled with this idea at first. I can attribute much of my understanding of this to Deborah Baker, a professor in my master's program. In our pedagogy course, she explained the importance of referring to the students by accurate terms. Like many of my colleagues, I often described particular "girls and guys" in my classes. She explained that I should not refer to them as girls because they were women. I replied, "How about if I call them chicks?" Of course, the answer to that was "no." "How about gals?" That was more acceptable, but not really my style of speaking. Over time, she impressed on me the importance of referring to women as women and men as men. When I went on to my doctoral program, this principle was so ingrained in me that I was surprised and a bit shocked to hear some of my self-professed feminist colleagues calling their students "girls." I thought that these people in particular would know

better, but this simply illustrates how easy it is to slip into these linguistic grooves. It was then that I also began to notice that women seemed to bear much of the burden of being treated as children.

This narrative brings me to my first proposal. Such training should be done early in one's academic career. As faculty, we teach future faculty whether we recognize it or not. We must first set an appropriate example. If we treat students as children, they are more likely to internalize that conception of the relationship between students and faculty, which they, in turn, are likely to perpetuate as they move into the role of teacher. Faculty must demonstrate the importance of language not only in the abstract but also in the practical. Moreover, such training in language should be a part of the curriculum for teaching potential faculty. This should not be done in the setting of the often clumsily done diversity training familiar to many of us, but rather should be integrated into the curriculum, especially in pedagogy courses.

Second, teachers must recognize the power that they hold in the classroom. In this role they have some control of the classroom environment. One can see this in mundane ways, such as those professors who feel that a tense classroom is a productive classroom. Such professors put their students on the spot and mercilessly grill them. Teachers likewise have considerable power in defining the relationship between the students and the teacher. If professors treat the students with respect and as adults, they will shape the atmosphere of the classroom to those ends.

Finally, teachers should examine their own beliefs concerning students. As suggested earlier, these beliefs are often evident in the language that we choose to describe them and these terms shape our actions. As Wendell Johnson states, "The way we classify, or label, an individual or thing determines very largely how we will react toward it. When our classification, or labeling, of an individual determines, entirely and without exception, our attitudes and reaction toward that individual, our behavior is scarcely distinguishable from the behavior of Pavlov's dogs."[8] Calling students "boys and girls" leads one to think of and treat them as children.

A primary responsibility of any teacher is to create an environment in which teaching is possible. Janis Andersen and her colleagues suggest that "the most effective class discussions are enacted in an environment where participants share mutual respect and instructional responsibility."[9] Adopting correct terms that adequately describe one's students is a fundamental component of creating such an atmosphere of respect.

Notes

1. Dan F. Hahn and Robert L. Ivie, "'Sex' as a Rhetorical Invitation to War," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 45, no. 1 (1988): 15.
2. Thomas S. Mawhinney and Laura L. Sagan, "The Power of Personal Relationships," *Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 6 (2007): 460–64; Debra Meyer and Julianne Turner, "Re-Conceptualizing Emotion and Motivation to Learn in Classroom Contexts," *Educational Psychology Review* 18, no. 4 (2006): 377–90; Carole F. Robinson and Peter J. Kakela, "Creating a Space to Learn," *College Teaching* 54, no. 1 (2006): 202–6.
3. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), p. 47.
4. Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956), p. 135.
5. Edward Sapir, *Language, an Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1921), p. 14.
6. Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication; A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 49.
7. See Tin Lay Nwe, Say Wei Foo, and Liyanage C. De Silva, "Speech Emotion Recognition Using Hidden Markov Models," *Speech Communication* 41, no. 4 (2003): 603–23; Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thompson/Wadsworth, 2007), pp. 32–33.
8. Wendell Johnson, *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment* (Concord, CA: International Society for General Semantics, 1946), p. 193.
9. Janis Andersen et al., "Interactional Skills in Instructional Settings," in *Teaching Communication: Theory, Research, and Methods*, ed. Anita L. Vangelisti, John A. Daly, and Gustav W. Friedrich (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates, 1999), pp. 359–74, 363.